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## **REMARKS BY U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BANGLADESH DAN MOZENA ADVANCING DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE DIPLOMACY ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION AMERICAN CENTER, DHAKA March 25, 2013**

Secretary for Social Welfare, Ranjit Kumar Biswas

David Lowen, Handicap International

Sophia Newman, Fulbright Researcher

Colleagues, friends and all who care about the rights of the disabled

Asalaam 'malaikum and good afternoon.

St. Joseph's was a fearful place ... home for the mentally ill, said the cheery side on the outside ... inside it was anything but a cheery place ... it was a warehouse, a warehouse of humanity ... people, sick people, people suffering from mental illness were confined to cells and sometimes even shackled ... it was for their own protection, explained the perky lady in charge, as she swept her arm dismissively over the detritus of humanity, as she put it.

A closet is a small room for storing things. Typically when we think of closets, we think of storing clothes, shoes, hats. Closets in America once stored something else, human beings. Figuratively and sometimes literally, disabled people were confined to closets ... they were embarrassing, it was said, or they reflected badly on the family ... indeed, the disabled were kept out of sight ... invisible to society ... out of sight, out of mind.

No more ...

In America and around the world, the disabled have come out of the shadows, demanding their rights, demanding their rightful role in society.

In my hometown back in Iowa, St. Joseph's has long been torn down ... and across America, closets are now places for shirts and shoes, not people.

Indeed, in one lifetime ... mine ... America has experienced a revolution in regard to the rights of the disabled ... in these decades, this revolution has fundamentally altered American society's perception of the disabled ... progress has been considerable, but, of course, much, much remains to be done.

Boiled to its essence, this revolution is about rights, recognizing that the disabled, like other citizens, have rights ... and discrimination against people because they are disabled is unacceptable, illegal and will not be tolerated.

The cornerstone of recognizing the rights of the disabled is first to acknowledge who the disabled are. In America, we define the "disabled" as "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." America supports the rights of the disabled both at home and around the world.

Our landmark Americans with Disability Act of 1990, as amended in 2008, is the foundation for protecting the rights of the disabled as it prohibits discrimination based on disability. The law provides the disabled protection in a range of areas, including employment, public transportation, public accommodations and commercial facilities, among others. A new frontier of rights for the disabled may be cyberspace.

The Americans with Disability Act continues to serve as a model for both domestic and multilateral legislation around the world. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which encapsulates the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and accessibility, is largely based on the Americans with Disability Act.

When President Obama signed this UN convention in 2009, he observed, "discrimination against persons with disabilities is not only an injustice, it is a strain on economic development, a limit to democracy, a burden on families, and a cause of social erosion." Senate ratification of this convention is a high priority for both the President and Secretary Kerry.

The State Department continues to work to support the rights of the disabled. Once a year in the annual human rights report, we describe the rights of the disabled as set forth in law in each country. We then assess the government's performance in protecting and advancing the rights of the disabled. In regard to Bangladesh, for example, our latest human rights report describes the sweeping nature of the 2001 Disabled Welfare Act and its 2008 regulations, but

assesses that the law's impact is limited due to vague obligations, weak implementation mechanisms, and a sweeping indemnity clause.

America remains committed to the vision of the Americans with Disability Act and to the continued removal of barriers to create a world in which persons with disabilities truly enjoy the dignity and respect they deserve.

To that end, we encourage and assist governments on the development and effective implementation of laws to protect the rights of persons with disabilities.

We encourage and assist civil society organizations, including organizations of persons with disabilities and their families, to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities.

We encourage US businesses operating overseas as well as domestic host country businesses to take into consideration persons with disabilities in relation to employment practices and local stakeholder engagements, including in their labor and human rights corporate social responsibility policies, programs, and practices.

We urge governments to combat discrimination, prejudice and abuse against persons with disabilities and to protect the rights and ensure the dignity and inclusions of all persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others.

In Bangladesh, America has worked with a number of the individuals and groups in this room to strengthen the capacity of disabled people's organizations, to make voting more accessible, and to encourage grant recipients to include persons with disabilities in their work.

And every day in this very room, my Public Affairs team works with social entrepreneurs to develop grant programs for the betterment of civil society. In 2011 we awarded an Edward M. Kennedy small grant for the empowerment of disabled people through theater and the performing arts... I encourage you to work with the Public Affairs team on any project proposals you may have in mind.

Bangladesh is working to advance the well-being of the disabled. I am especially impressed by the government's attention to helping those who have autism. Of course, more challenges lie ahead as Bangladesh endeavors to advance the well-being of the disabled by adopting accessibility standards, promoting the employment of persons with disabilities, adopting strong anti-discrimination legislation, promoting effective legal enforcement mechanisms, advocating for access to inclusive education, and preventing violence against persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls.

As I compare my earliest memories from the 1950's, when many used to consider the disabled with disdain or pity, to the situation of the disabled today, as they demand their rights, I am proud of the great progress the world has made in according the disabled the rights that they deserve, equal to those of any other citizen. But this global progress has been uneven, with some countries lagging behind, and everywhere, the job is far from finished.

I think this roundtable discussion today can contribute to our better understanding the progress and challenges of the disable, both here in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

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*\*As prepared for delivery*